

Post 11/24/77

'What Special Magic Did He Have?'

Ten years?

In some ways it seems like only yesterday that John F. Kennedy was cut down in the prime of his life and his powers while riding through the streets of Dallas. And yet, how long ago it seems that there was a civil national dialogue in the United States—how long since the overwhelming majority of Americans believed their government and respected their president.

The fact that we pause to remember these 10 years is itself a worldwide phenomenon. In every major country, hundreds of hours of prime national television time have been devoted to recalling the story of this young man who only ruled America for two years, 10 months and two days. There is hardly a person on this globe who does not remember exactly where he or she was when first hearing of the death of President Kennedy. Many of these same people cannot remember with equal clarity their whereabouts on hearing of the death of their father or their mother, or other loved ones.

The Rhine River at Bonn is spanned by a Kennedy Bridge; the road from the airport to town in Nassau, Bahamas, is called Kennedy Boulevard; a housing center for workers in Colombia is called Ciudad Kennedy; New York has an airport named after him.

I can still remember that clear, crisp, cold morning in January 1961, when John Kennedy, looking even younger than his 43 years, dressed in a top hat and morning coat and drove the three miles up Constitution Avenue to the Capitol to be sworn in as President of the United States.

I remember a night in April three months later, after the invasion at the Bay of Pigs had failed on the beaches of Cuba. Lines of fatigue were etched on the face of a man who no longer appeared young. John Kennedy was a stranger to failure, and this was the worst setback of his life. He walked out the side door of his office onto the path that winds around the south lawn of the White House and there, in the darkness, for two hours, I saw him walk alone, head down, hands in his pockets. It was a striking view of the loneliness of the American presidency.

Ten years?

I remember the days of the Cuban missile crisis, when the President's military aide came to hand me a sealed envelope. It contained instructions for my wife should the American government have to disappear to a secret location because of an imminent Soviet nuclear attack. For 10 days, I left my office barely three hours a day to sleep at a nearby hotel. My assistant slept on the floor of my office, the secretaries in the White House bomb shelter.

I remember a night in the boiler room of a Boston hospital, a few minutes after John and Jacqueline Kennedy's third child, Patrick, died, six days after he was born. The President had fled to the boiler room to weep alone, disconsolate.

I remember the day he died. I remember being on that plane, 10,000 miles from Dallas, with six members of the President's cabinet, when we got the first flash that he had been shot. I remember the consternation and the sorrow 46 minutes later when the

White House, using our code names, told me over the radio: "Wayside, Lancer is dead."

Yes, I remember, but that is normal because I was there. But why should hundreds of millions of other people around the world remember? What special magic did John Kennedy have

The writer served as press secretary to President Kennedy and is now a correspondent for the French magazine L'Express.

that indelibly inscribed his name and his image on their hearts and souls? After all, he was not President very long.

The answer is that men fired with idealism have the ability to communicate their visions to millions of people and to make an indelible impression on the world.

John Kennedy was such a man. He communicated a sense of hope to a world long disillusioned by war and domestic struggle. He refused to admit that the people on this earth were captives of their fate, and it was this expressed notion of man's ability to shape his own future that linked him to millions struggling to escape neglect, poverty and tyranny.

Not only that. He understood that democracy would surely fall unless there was trust and belief between the governors and the governed. People were more apt to accept the decisions of government, he thought, if they understood how and why they had been reached.

A comparison of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 with the recent dealings between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Mideast war is instructive.

I remember the dark days of the Cuban missile crisis as if they were yesterday. It was, after all, the first time in the history of this world (and I hope the last) that a real possibility existed that the great powers might resort to nuclear weapons in a confrontation.

Public support for the President's position was essential. But how were we to prove that the Soviets really had put offensive missiles capable of hitting major American cities on the soil of Cuba?

I remembered when I received the pictures that I was to give the press. They were supposed to show the installation of Soviet missiles. But my reaction on looking at the pictures was that, to a layman, they would look more like a furrow cut in the soil by a Cuban farmer. Those pictures appeared on the front pages of the world's newspapers. They were believed to depict what the U.S. government said they showed because there was a basis for credibility at the time.

The Kennedy administration did not believe that lying to its people was an essential and inherent necessity of government. More than that, President Kennedy's credibility had been enhanced by his prompt acceptance of personal blame for the Bay of Pigs disaster.

Eleven years later, when President Nixon announced that American forces had been put on nuclear alert to face down a Soviet threat of unilateral ac-

tion in the Mideast, the majority of Nixon's fellow citizens refused to accept his explanation. A great many felt that the alert was simply a maneuver to take the minds of Americans off the Watergate scandal. I personally do not accept that view, but I cite it to show how dangerous an erosion of credibility can be for a leader faced with real world crisis.

The 10 years since the death of John Kennedy have been a time of trauma.

First, the death of the President himself brutally affected the country. This was particularly true of the young who had been engaged by his idealism. The assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King compounded that problem.

The Vietnam war created a separate set of scars on the American psyche. The realization that the United States could not impose its will with impunity, as it had in the past, was sobering to the many Americans who continued to believe in Pax Americana.

Lyndon Johnson, a perfectly acceptable President on the domestic front (history may even record that he was a great President in that domain) was hounded from office because of the revolution, mostly among the young, created by the Vietnam war.

The black revolution of the late '60s scorched the major cities of the North, and an uneasy truce now reigns between the racial communities, capable for the slightest unexpected reason of exploding at any time.

The Watergate scandal has had a profound effect on the nation, giving rise for the first time in 100 years to calls for the impeachment or resignation of a sitting President. A Vice President has resigned. Recently a respected member of the Congress spoke for the first of a subject which has been whispered in the corridors—the possibility that the U.S. armed forces might intervene in its domestic politics and take power to clean up what many military men believe to be a disgraceful mess.

There is no purpose now in trying to imagine how much of all that would be different if John Kennedy had lived. He did not.

It is sufficient to understand that 10 years after his death, his spirit lives on, a spirit characterized by a quotation of George Bernard Shaw that was one of the President's favorites:

"Some people see things as they are and ask why? I dream dreams that never were and ask, why not?"